

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 231 108

EC 151 983

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TITLE Does Mainstreaming Insure Integration?
INSTITUTION Kansas Univ., Lawrence. Early Childhood Inst.
PUB DATE [83]
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Data Collection; *Disabilities; *Interaction Process Analysis; *Mainstreaming; *Observation; *Peer Relationship; Play; Preschool Education; *Social Behavior; Student Behavior; Student Placement

ABSTRACT

A code to systematically observe preschool settings in which handicapped children were placed was designed to determine the types of interaction and play behavior that occurs in these settings. The code records the following information: play area the child is in, how many children are in the same area, the play behavior the child is undertaking, who the child is with, and special incidences of positive or negative affection and aggression. Preliminary findings showed almost 50 percent of the interactions recorded were between handicapped and nonhandicapped children; given the high ratio of handicapped to normal children in the classroom, the probability of interaction is more than 50 percent, although the nonhandicapped children seemed generally accepting of their handicapped peers, sometimes there was outright rejection; handicapped children were more likely to be included with a group of children than to be selected by a nonhandicapped child to play with on a one-to-one basis; handicapped children were likely to be excluded by their normal peers for play that required more skills than for less skilled activities; when the only choice of a playmate was a handicapped child, the nonhandicapped children engaged in more isolated play; and handicapped children were less likely to initiate contact. Finally, activities are being planned to encourage social interaction in the mainstreamed setting. (SEW)

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DOES MAINSTREAMING INSURE INTEGRATION?

by

Barbara Gentry

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In 1969, the University of Kansas set up its first preschool class for handicapped children under the direction of Dr. Nancy Peterson. Three years later the classroom was integrated to include several normal children to serve as models for the handicapped youngsters. Though the idea was first treated with skepticism, as teachers and parents saw how integration worked, that it didn't hurt either group of children, and in fact seemed to accelerate the learning of the handicapped kids, they grew enthusiastic about the project.

How Much Integration?

As the class developed, Dr. Peterson, now working with the Early Childhood Institute at KU, recognized that there were many research questions to be answered. During the first few months, data were taken by hand to investigate several issues, the most important being "How much integration was there really?"

"We cannot assume that this will naturally occur just by putting kids together," Dr. Peterson said. There are currently six or seven people across the country addressing the integration in preschool issue. Though there are quite a lot of data on mainstreaming in elementary schools, Dr. Peterson feels we can't assume that these results are directly applicable to preschool handicapped children. "The younger children aren't as socially skilled as the older kids," Dr. Peterson reminds. "What we need now is empirical data to examine the effects of integrated preschool settings on the learning and social behavior of preschoolers."

In order to systematically observe integrated and mainstreamed preschool settings, Dr. Peterson designed a rather simple code. As time passed researchers noticed that the children's behavior changed drastically from one day to the next. Why was there so much variability?

The Ecology of Behavior

Dr. Peterson and her colleagues eventually discovered the reason for these big changes. It turned out to be an issue that ecologists had been examining for years. Dr. Peterson explained, "The fact is that the environment greatly affects the behavior of the people within it." The researchers found that the toys children played with greatly controlled their behavior--something not taken into account in the code. "Children will act differently if you give them crayons and paper and sit them down at a table than they act with a set of tinker toys. You must look at the ecology of play behavior--that was the lesson we learned early."

Ecology includes who the kids have available to play with. "Most codes make the assumption that a child in a classroom with 12 kids has access to all 12 kids. But we decided to look at the environment to see who was available--how many and who they are, whether they were handicapped or

normal," Dr. Peterson said. Ecology also includes the teacher's presence--her intervention, guidance, and reinforcement.

Revised Code

After taking these things into consideration, the code was revised and expanded. Currently it includes two booklets and takes three to four weeks to train observers. It records the following information:

- Play area the child is in
- How many kids are in the same area
- Who those children are
- Is the teacher there
- What play behavior the child is engaging in (isolate--a child playing alone; parallel--a child playing next to another child, both engaged in a play activity with materials from the same play area, able to see each other, but not playing together; or cooperative--two or more children interacting with each other, contributing towards a common goal)
- With whom
- Special incidences of positive or negative affection and aggression.

Preliminary Findings

The purpose of this research is to examine the assumptions underlying integration and to examine the types of interaction and play behavior that actually occur. Although the research isn't completed, the trends from the preliminary data show:

- Almost 50 percent of the interactions recorded are between handicapped and nonhandicapped children.
- But given the high ratio of handicapped to normal children in the classroom, the probability of interaction is more than 50 percent.

The breakdown is as follows:

1. A child is more likely to select another normal child to play with than to select a handicapped child if that child is to be the only playmate.
2. Handicapped children are more likely to be included with a group of children than to be selected by a normal child to play with on a one-to-one basis.
3. In play areas that require more skills (such as blocks), handicapped children are likely to be excluded by their normal peers, but in play areas that require less skill (like housekeeping) handicapped children are more likely to be included.
4. When the only choice of a playmate is a handicapped child, the normal children engage in more isolate play; when the only choice is a normal child, there is more cooperative play.
5. Handicapped kids are less likely to initiate contact. Normal children are more likely to respond to a gesture for play--this tends to make it more likely that a normal child will attempt interaction with another normal kid and that the offer will be accepted.
6. When handicapped children play with each other, they tend to engage in more primitive types of play (parallel and isolate) than normal children do when playing together.

Though the children seem generally accepting of their handicapped peers, sometimes there is outright rejection. This tends to come when a handicapped child engages in unpredictable behavior, when the handicap is more severe and visible, and when the child seems "unclean" (such as runny nose, drooling).

Encouraging Social Interaction

Research activities are planned to investigate procedures to optimize social interaction among the handicapped and nonhandicapped children. Dr.

Peterson outlined several options that they hope to implement soon:

1. Environmental intervention only--creating games that require certain kinds of interactions between handicapped and nonhandicapped children.
2. Using a reinforcement strategy to teach the kids to play together--such as giving out warm fuzzies for being nice to each other.
3. Setting up a sequence of things the kids have to do before they can go to free play, thus assuring a positive interaction between handicapped and normal kids going into free play. Possibly this will rub off so that playmates will be selected from this positive experience.

In addition to taking data in the KJ classroom, Dr. Peterson is observing the behavior of children in classrooms with other ratios of handicapped to normal children. One research site is the preschool for handicapped children only sponsored by the Topeka Association for Retarded Citizens. Another site is the Infant Development Center at Shawnee Mission Hospital in Kansas City, where the ratio of handicapped to nonhandicapped children is about one-to-one.

Although integrating young handicapped and normal children in preschool classrooms is now accepted procedure, there is still much to be done to make it work as intended. The research that Nancy Peterson is doing at the Early Childhood Institute should give teachers new techniques for insuring that the children learn to play together, thus bringing integration one step closer to its goal.

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